

Yr. C, Proper 9
July 7, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1501 Words

Lessons: Isaiah 66:10-14
Psalm 66:1-8
Galatians 6:1-16
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

The pebbles and dusty clay are still memorable—the way it looked to everyone who was looking down and listening for their names to be called; the smell of that dust rising to our noses as our nervous little feet chiseled away at the first base line.

The first nine players on *all* of the little league teams had already been selected. The rest of us stood on that first base line, nervously waiting to hear our names called—even for a chance to warm the bench.

Waiting and listening for your name is the hardest part when you're not considered to be as good as other people. Sports and teams and competitions of all sorts present us with clear winners *and* losers. As the promotional advertisement for the ABC Wide World of Sports used to recount with dramatic background music—"The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

Today is the Sunday we get to look *and listen* to how Jesus treats the people whose names have not yet been called. The Gospel according to St. Luke invites us to see all those people standing around in the pebbles and dusty clay of Palestine, waiting to hear if they would fit in with the Jesus Movement.

This Sunday offers a glimpse of hope to all of us who have been the *unchosen* at one time or another. Today is the day we get to see what Jesus does with all those who are not considered to be as good as other people. What does Jesus do with people who would be happy just to 'warm the bench'?

This is what he did: "The Lord appointed 70 others...and sent them on ahead in pairs to every place he intended to go." Now, Jesus already had his twelve apostles—the first string—the people we know by name. But then, he took all the other unnamed, unchosen—stragglers and 'hangers on'—and he asked *them* to become leaders. Listen again to what Jesus did: "He sent them on ahead in pairs to every place he, himself, intended to go." In other words, Jesus asked *them* to lead the way for *him*.

Who *does* that? Not coaches who want to win ball games. Not CEO's who want to win market share. Not partisans who want to win elections. Something *very different* seems to be going on here with the Son of God.

"The harvest is plentiful," Jesus says, "but the laborers are few." Well, of course the laborers are few—who among *you* wants to be sent out like lambs into the midst of wolves? ...I thought so!

It's not a fair fight to lead with grace in a world that only respects aggression. It is not a fair contest to lead with mercy in a world that only respects vengeance. It's not easy to lead with humility in a world that only respects power and control.

"Furman Lee Buchanan," read Mr. Hooper from the bottom of the list on his clipboard. He stood on the grassy infield, beside the pitcher's mound, smacking his bubble gum and smiling at me. I saw this because...*finally* I was able to look up from the pebbles and dusty clay of the first base line where I kept nervously scraping at the dirt with my right foot...and waiting...hoping...praying to hear my name.

Finally, I was one of the seventy (or so) boys who wanted so badly to play baseball whether anyone else wanted us to play or not. God bless Mr. Hooper for not leaving me standing there waiting any longer. Mr. Hooper showed me that while I was not as good as other people, I was still *good enough*. It was a Jesus moment—whether he realized it or not.

At last, I would be able to wear the white, polyester uniform of the Piggly Wiggly team, with green and yellow trim around the sleeves and over the thick, elastic waist band. Once my mother paid my deposit, I would be able to pull on those tall green, nylon socks—the kind with that skinny band that goes under the arch of your foot and makes you look like a real baseball player!

Second, third, or *fourth* string—who cares? At least I could wear the uniform on the bench of the dugout. You see, that was as far as my aspirations could reach at the time. The only thing I knew for sure is that I was not as good as other people. It's the same problem we experience in the church—people who think they are not as good as other people, and so they are content to just sit on the bench.

As if it were not hard enough already, Jesus tells *his* new recruits—the seventy—to leave purses and bags and belongings behind. What I hear in those instructions is that members of Jesus' team were not given any sort of uniform. There was no outward and visible sign of their belonging to him—no wealth, no power, no control. The *only* indication that the seventy were part of Jesus' team would be inward and spiritual—things like grace, mercy, and humility. As the song goes, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." That is all we have to go on.

The assignment for the seventy leaders going ahead of Jesus was simply to be as vulnerable as he was. They were to bless, heal, and restore those who were hurting, marginalized, and ignored. And they were *not to worry* about the arrogant, rude, and inhospitable people along the way.

Imagine going ahead of Jesus this week to the places you will go. You're not wearing a collar or a robe or carrying a bible or a cross. There's no outward and visible sign that you are part of the Jesus Movement. There is only the inward and spiritual grace that you are willing to take *and share* with others.

If your aspiration is only to sit on the bench, I understand. I have felt that way myself. I understand the feeling, so I'm going to do for you what Mr. Hooper did for me. I'm going to smile and say, "You're right. You're not as good as other people. But you are good enough."

My little league coach knew one thing for sure. If I practiced baseball I would get better at baseball. Your priest likewise knows one thing for sure. If you practice living with faith, you will get better at living with faith. If you practice living with hope, you will get better at living with hope. If you practice living with love, you will get better at living with love. And if you don't practice, you won't.

Today, we would like to appoint about seventy of you to serve in some new way. If you are already involved in serving—either here at this church or in one of our many outreach ministries, then I am not really addressing you as much. However, if you have not yet found an avenue to serve here...or if you would like to explore a new avenue to serve, then please consider adding your name to one of the lists on the podium at the back when you leave today.

Marie and I selected a few categories of service in which our parish needs a 'deeper bench.' We know we need more teams of angels who will prepare and deliver an occasional meal to someone who is getting back on their feet after a surgery. We know we need more volunteers to help drive someone for an occasional appointment or errand. We could use more volunteers who serve a meal for St. Peter's Youth on Sunday evenings as a way of showing support for their formation and fellowship.

Perhaps you can't cook. Maybe you could send a card or a note to someone on our prayer list each week. There are lots of ways to say, "God loves you and I love you." Mother Theresa, herself, said, "I can do no great things. I can only do small things with great love." Well, you're probably not as good as she is, but you are good enough!

So, stop looking down and wondering if your name will be called. Aspire for more than warming the bench, because *you* have been appointed by Jesus to go before him to every place that he, himself, intends to go—not with a collar or a robe, a cross or a bible; but with the inward and spiritual grace that you are willing to take and share with others in Jesus' name.

Answering this call begins with practice as part of a team. I hope you will consider being on our team. Being part of Jesus' team is not about winning or losing. It is about practicing the fundamentals of living our faith, hope, and love outwardly for the blessing and benefit of others.

Then, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.